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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [ZI](#)

SUBJECT: BISHOPS PROPOSE PARTIES' RETREAT

Classified By: Political Officer Win Dayton, under Section 1.5(b), (d)

1. (C) Bishop Trevor Manhanga on September 26 offered the Embassy an update on the so-called bishops' initiative. According to Manhanga, the bishops continued to meet personally with representatives from each party at least once a week. They remained especially encouraged by ZANU-PF's posture, noting that party principals had met despite potential schedule conflicts entailed by Vice President Muzenda's funeral. According to Manhanga, the MDC had followed the bishops' counsel to have a substantial presence at the Muzenda funeral, a gesture of good will that had been reciprocated by Mugabe's public recognition of their presence. Manhanga maintained that Mugabe's implicit concession in his eulogy that he had erred "as an older brother" was a positive signal for potential negotiations. He noted that ZANU-PF elements' loud applause for Mugabe's "outreach" to the MDC during the eulogy evidenced popular support for the talks and also bode well.

2. (C) Manhanga asserted that, encouraged by the parties' growing candor and good will, the bishops had proposed at their most recent meetings with each party that the time was ripe for a face-to-face pre-talks confidential retreat. He said the parties would caucus on the issue and advise the bishops during the week of September 29 of their receptivity to such a meeting. Manhanga confided that in the meeting with ZANU-PF, Party Spokesman Nathan Shamuyarira had been quite enthusiastic about the idea while Party Chairman John Nkomo was more guarded. As for getting beyond a retreat and to the table, Manhanga said that the key lay in finessing a face-saving resolution to ZANU-PF demands for MDC public statements on Mugabe's legitimacy and urging an end to "international sanctions."

3. (C) Manhanga advised that the bishops had covered the international waterfront in pushing their initiative, having met with representatives from Malawi, Nigeria, South Africa, and Australia, among others. Manhanga said that the bishops understood that the USG was not in a position to be offering carrots or benchmarked timetables for a normalizing of relations with Zimbabwe. Nonetheless, he urged that the USG and other western donors be prepared to be prepared to move quickly with confidence-building measures should the parties end their impasse and come to the table. He said that some support for aspects of land reform could be potentially decisive in moving ZANU-PF forward in any negotiating process.

4. (C) COMMENT: ZANU-PF may yet be prepared make a gesture toward starting talks in hopes of getting the government an invitation to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), notwithstanding international outcry over The Daily News closure. The party has yet to project seriousness about negotiations beyond appearing to consider the mere possibility of their commencement, however.
SULLIVAN